World Chronicle

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LAND MINES

Years of conflict have left millions of scattered and unrecorded land mines in more than fifty countries. Civilians, children, as well as adults, are more and more often targets of these sly weapons in times of war and have by the thousands of victims of their deadly legacy in times of peace. Land mines have removed vast areas of land and resources from productive use. Countries with weak or barely existing social and economic infrastructures are often the hardest hit, and within these countries the poor are those who suffer the most and are least able to cope. In this edition of **World Chronicle**, Mary Fowler, Officer-in-Charge of the United Nations Mine Action Service, talks about what is being done to get rid of these execrable weapons.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Landmines and unexploded ordnance are a problem in one-third of the world's nations. Among the countries most severely affected are those that are least developed, struggling to provide their societies with even the most basic of means. UNMAS, the United Nations Mine Action Service, is the focal point within the UN system for all mine-related activities. UNMAS, in consultation with other partners, establishes priorities for assessment missions, facilitates the dialogue with donor countries and coordinates the mobilization of resources. It is also responsible for the development, maintenance and promotion of technical and safety standards. It collects and disseminates mine-related information in support of advocacy efforts for a global ban on antipersonnel landmines.

Our guest today is an expert in the issue of landmines. She is Mary Fowler, Officer-in-Charge of the United Nations Mine Action Service. Joining me to talk with Ms. Fowler are James Wurst of *InterPress Service* and Ian Williams of *The Nation*.

Ms. Fowler, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

FOWLER: Thank you very much, Michael.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Fowler, landmines are a particularly nasty, brutal form of ordnance yet it seems to me extraordinarily difficult to get governments to give up this means of warfare. What progress has been made, to the best of your knowledge, to get these things off the books so to speak?

FOWLER: Well, I think the Ottawa Treaty was a big step forward in this process but it still has a ways to go. Having said that, I think that no other treaty has worked as quickly or as effectively in fact as the Ottawa process.

LITTLEJOHNS: What did the Ottawa Treaty say?

FOWLER: The Ottawa Treaty went outside of the traditional mechanisms for coming together on an international treaty basis and they have got a lot of like-minded states parties who have agreed to a total ban. And this is a ban on production, on use, on export and I think also, quite importantly, on an agreement on destruction of stock piles so that the weapons won't be used should those countries

later on go into any kind of conflict. And I think that's terribly important. So 139 countries have signed and I believe about 90-something have ratified the Treaty thus far. And, of course, this is happening on a daily basis and we hope that many more will ratify because until they do they're not actually held to the terms of the Treaty.

LITTLEJOHNS: I think I read somewhere that the United States is not happy with this arrangement, is that right?

FOWLER: I'm not sure that "not happy" is the right phrase. I think the United States is uncomfortable with some parts of the Treaty and in particular they feel that they have to have the right to use landmines in certain circumstances. And they quote Korea. Not all Member States agree with that.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean Korea during the Korean War?

FOWLER: No right now. They use landmines along the border with North and South Korea and they wish to retain the right to do so. I think that is one of the principal reasons that was given but having said that I think the United States does a lot for the removal of landmines elsewhere and they do not export and they do not – to my knowledge anyway – we have not found any US made landmines in any of the conflicts where we have been working over the past five or six years. Obviously, I would like them to sign on to this Treaty. I think it would be a very important step for them to do so and would show great leadership but at the moment they are not able to do so.

LITTLEJOHNS: Which country is the biggest offender, has laid down the greatest number of landmines?

FOWLER: I don't know that I can answer that question because I think if you look at the past where countries have placed mines, I don't think we have total numbers on that. I mean, the major exporters have been China but China has signed on to the moratorium now. The former Yugoslavia is still exporting. A number of the countries that used to be big exporters and where we're still finding their mines in countries that are in conflict, have in fact stopped exporting over the past three or four years.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is the best estimate of the total number of landmines all over the world?

FOWLER: I don't know because until we remove them all we don't know how many are there but it is certainly a lot. And I think that the important thing is....

LITTLEJOHNS: Billions?

FOWLER: I don't know if it is billions and I don't know frankly how important the numbers are. And I think that they tend to get us into trouble sometimes because it can cost as much money to clear an area where we suspect there is a mine as it can to clear an area where you find 30 mines or 50 mines or a 100 mines. So frankly, if you cannot tell people that they can use that land and that land is then useless then there is a great cost and so we tend to not put any emphasis on the numbers of mines but on mine fields and suspected areas.

WURST: On that point does your hesitancy to talk about numbers have anything to do with the fact that a number of critics have said that well the UN, but other bodies involved in mine clearance, overestimate the number of mines still out in the field? I mean is there still a problem with a miscount or an over-count?

FOWLER: I don't think it's a deliberate thing and I think when we started this process five or six years ago people used best estimates. And as I said, we would go into a particular area and always we would go first to the area where there tended to be a great density of mines. And that's a natural thing to do because you know there are a lot of accidents there, all the mines are visible, so you go into that area. It's very densely mined and so you would multiply that particular area by the suspected area and come up with a total number. Many of the numbers that we used at the beginning were gleaned from a number of different sources. Since we have started to do the more detailed assessment missions and we have been able to clarify a little bit more I think we are finding that the numbers are in fact less than were originally expected in some cases, higher in others, but generally speaking less. But the impact on that land is still the same.

WURST: According to one map of the UN, well from1999, it talks about 69 nations or territories that are infested with mines. Given that you've been – you the international community I should say has been involved in clearing mines for working on six years now can you say emphatically any of these countries, any of these places are now mine-free?

FOWLER: I'm not sure that it's mine-free. In fact, we've been in longer than that because we've been ten years in Afghanistan, for example. But I think that it is fair to say that in a country like Mozambique, which was very heavily mine-infested

after the war, that the people of Mozambique now can live more normal lives. And there are huge areas that have been cleared with enormous effort and enormous cost from the international community. There are still also areas of Mozambique that are mine-infested. And if you take a country like Zimbabwe where generally speaking you can walk around the country and there are no mines, however, along the border with Mozambique there is a very densely mined area all along that border. It's not worth our while at this time to go in and clear those mines. So it is not a mine-free country but the mines are not a great humanitarian problem because they're quite well marked and they're quite well fenced.

WILLIAMS: I notice that one of the things that the United Nations General Assembly resolution says, I think is part of your task is to stigmatize countries that are still making, stockpiling and using mines.

FOWLER: Right.

WILLIAMS: Now this is something that does not go well with the United Nations because as long as you are sitting in the General Assembly seat you can have horns and a tail and you're still welcomed as amongst the saints as a general rule. Have you actively stigmatized anybody for production and use of mines?

FOWLER: I think that we do advocate for a ban on landmines and we do that very publicly and at many different levels. And while stigmatize is a very strong word I think it does not take a lot – once you've seen the impact that these mines have on people after a conflict – to realize how worthwhile and objective that can be. I must say that the United Nations goes to a lot of trouble to work out a peace treaty and to negotiate peace and then the people that are living in those areas are living for generations afterwards with these weapons that are still around. It's a constant reminder to them. I don't know how you or I would forget the war when you can't go and collect water or firewood or take your children to school or let them play with this constant brutal reminder. It's not like other weapons.

WILLIAMS: Well if that level of public indignation -- and it was public indignation which made the Ottawa Treaty so special and so rapid – that's why I'm asking how effectively can you break with UN tradition and point a finger at a country in world public opinion and say, "they are the people who are doing this"?

FOWLER: Well, we do do it and we work very closely with other partners but sometimes you can be more effective by doing things gently as opposed to

beating people on the head. And occasionally we beat people on the head but generally we try to do this in a fairly diplomatic way. Today, we have conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Mines are being laid in that conflict. One of those countries is a signatory to the Ottawa Treaty. It's very disappointing to see that these mines are being laid and we have been very vocal about this and we will continue to be quite vocal about it. We also, on our website, we publish the names of landmine producers linked to the site. We encourage countries that have taken steps forward, such as Egypt – Egypt has a huge mine problem and unexploded ordnance problem particularly in the Al-Alamein area and enormous population pressures on that area now....

WILLIAMS: It was hardly Egypt's fault though.

FOWLER: No, exactly. It was not Egypt's fault at all. However, Egypt for the time being has stated – their foreign minister told me that, "We do not export and we do not produce landmines". This is, I think, a big step forward and one that has to be encouraged. People can't always go from A to Z in one step. They need to be encouraged and we'd like to encourage them to go as quickly as possible. But I don't think necessarily beating people over the head is the best way of getting where you want to go always.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Fowler, landmines are obviously highly indiscriminate and women, children, civilians of both sexes are perhaps the most vulnerable. Why do governments continue to use this form of weapon?

FOWLER: I think they should be here to answer that question.

LITTLEJOHNS: But don't you have a theory?

FOWLER: I do. Well they're very inexpensive, they're very easy to use and they're very effective. In combat obviously it is far more demoralizing for a longer period of time to have to carry the burden of people who are injured as opposed to somebody who is dead. Somebody who is killed, there is death and a grieving and the process is over. If your soldiers or your civilians are grossly mutilated and they then become a burden on the society as a whole it is considerably more demoralizing I think.

LITTLEJOHNS: So there usually are more civilian casualties than military?

FOWLER: Quite often, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Mary Fowler, Officer-in-Charge of the United Nations Mine Action Service.

WURST: Going back to this point of injuring rather than killing – that was one of the reasons that it was so effective to stigmatize it because it doesn't kill as opposed to nuclear weapons or carpet-bombing. People survive. Now part of your work and part of a lot of other people's work in this is helping the survivors. It's helping them to rehabilitate themselves. How well is that going given that the international community tends to have a very short attention span on humanitarian concerns like this?

FOWLER: Well, it's a very good point that you've raised and in fact, we at the United Nations have not done as much as we perhaps should have done in order to assist victims because we have been too busy fighting the actual placing of the mines and dealing with mine clearance operations and the other emergency activities. However, the ICRC – the International Committee of the Red Cross – and the non-governmental organizations in particular have taken the lead on this initiative. The World Health Organization from the UN family has been involved but I think the lead very much has been taken by the non-governmental organizations and they are doing an excellent job and we are trying to support them as much as we can. But because this requires a very long-term investment and very specialized skills it is not an area that we have been the leaders. But we have provided, I think, a lot of support and also a lot of guidance on where injuries are occurring and what is happening to cause the injuries and what people are doing at any particular time.

One of the most distressing facts in many of these cases is the fact that you go to somebody and say, "When you were injured did you know that that was a mine field?" And the answer is very often "Yes". "Well why were you there?" "Well, I needed water or I needed food or I needed to try and grow something for my family or we've been using that path every day as a shortcut." It's a real tragedy. But the assistance to victims is particularly harsh and it's very difficult for children because if they get an amputation and if they get good surgery and if they get a prosthetic – and these are all big ifs in these countries – then they require renewal of the prosthetic almost every six months as they grow. And of course that sort of health service is not provided in many of these countries.

WURST: And you end up with a kind of donor fatigue. I mean are you finding that support for long-term care, for long-term rehabilitation is decreasing. Are countries saying, well okay we've got a new project now, we've done this but this is as far as we can go on this one?

FOWLER: Actually not yet. No. Our funding has been consistent. I should add here that we are completely voluntarily funded, unlike many other parts of the United Nations. So we also have to raise all of our own funds. And the donors quite often will specify what those funds could be used for and some donors cannot use the money they give to us for mine action activities, for health related activities because that comes from another part of their own budgets. And so it may be happening through channels other than through the mine action channels.

WILLIAMS: Distinguishing between different weapons is always difficult. If you have to fill a questionnaire would you rather be gassed, shot, roasted alive with napalm or blown up I'd like to say none of the above thank you very much. I would hate to choose any of them. But is there a sort of a grey area between mines which are placed and the anti-personnel scatter bombs which have been dropped in recent conflicts and where something like 10 percent don't explode and are left around? In a sense they're sort of landmines dropped from the air. Are they landmines in your definition or are we in a grey area there?

FOWLER: They're not landmines as covered by the Ottawa Treaty. However, they do have exactly the same impact and I believe you are speaking about the cluster bombs that were dropped in Kosovo.

WILLIAMS: Oh, not just there. I mean in South Lebanon I saw them myself.

FOWLER: I know, but most recently. The cluster bombs are actually about the size of a Coca-Cola can. They're bright yellow. They have a little parachute device on the top and they're dropped very many of them at a time and they are supposed to explode on impact. And you're right there's a 10 to 15 percent -- maybe even higher -- failure rate and in fact some of them have gone sub-surface and so they're not very easy to find. But we have had a very high number of deaths and injuries from these cluster bombs in recent conflicts.

WILLIAMS: So are you considering trying to extend the provisions of the Treaty to cover these?

FOWLER: I think the Treaty is outside of the UN. It is up to the states parties to consider that, not the UN. However, we certainly have expressed our concern about the impact of these weapons and about in fact the lack of capacity to deal with them after a conflict because they cover such a wide area. And depending on winds and different soil conditions and everything else where we find them there are great variables there as well so it's a very difficult situation. And yes, they have exactly the same impact as landmines.

WILLIAMS: Do you have a list of countries that produce those? Have you tried the stigmatization route with them?

FOWLER: No, no we haven't.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Fowler, you mentioned Afghanistan and Mozambique what countries are most affected?

FOWLER: From a humanitarian perspective as opposed to a socio-economic perspective, and I think that these are very different sorts of things I would think.

LITTLEJOHNS: Where you are most likely to get blown up you mean?

FOWLER: Yes. I think that Angola is certainly way up there. Way up there at the moment. I would imagine that probably Chechnya will be as well although we have not been in there yet to determine the extent of the....

WILLIAMS: Could you identify which side is laying them in Chechnya? Both?

FOWLER: I don't know.

LITTLEJOHNS: Has Russia ratified the Ottawa Treaty?

FOWLER: No, no although Russia did sign on to a moratorium on production and export. I think that Afghanistan obviously is still very heavily infested.

LITTLEJOHNS: Cambodia.

FOWLER: Cambodia is still up there. Kosovo is still there although I think we are breaking the back of that problem because it's a very contained area and we had very, very good information on where the mines were laid and where the cluster bombs were dropped. And we had wonderful cooperation from NATO and the K-FOR forces as well that provided us with the information we needed to go in and help out there. So I think that generally Angola, Afghanistan, Cambodia...

LITTLEJOHNS: I noticed that in one of your documents it seems that pretty well, or at least most of the countries of Europe seem to have landmines. I suppose this is the residue of World War II?

FOWLER: That's correct.

LITTLEJOHNS: What's being done to clean them up?

FOWLER: Well, I think the countries concerned have the capacity to deal with them as much as they can. But again I think this is a good illustration of how long these weapons stay around and the kind of impact that they can have. And it's absolutely essential, I think, that we move toward a complete and total ban on the use. And the conflicts that we have taking place today landmines are still being used and we still have a lot of work ahead of us.

WURST: This brings up two points. On Chechnya for one thing, according to the international campaign to ban landmines, which of course is independent and has nothing to do with the UN – says that both sides in the Chechen conflict are using mines and the Chechens are using Russian-made mines. But this does bring up the issue of what happens when a party to a conflict is not a nation. The Ottawa Convention is for countries.

FOWLER: Right.

WURST: What about when it's a government versus a non-government – Chechnya and Angola, Afghanistan? What can you do?

FOWLER: Well, all we can is continue to advocate with whomever is in power and authority there. We have in a number of instances worked with rebel groups and other parties to try to go in and work. And I should stress here that we at UNMAS – the UN Mine Action Service – deal principally in humanitarian emergencies and in peacekeeping operations. We do not extend generally into the longer-term development countries. So we tend to deal with the countries that are either in conflict or recently recovered from conflict when it comes to operational things not when it comes to assessment missions and resource mobilization.

WILLIAMS: But do you think in these circumstances there's potential, for example, for the use of landmines to be a war crime adjudicable under the International Criminal Court?

FOWLER: Absolutely. Absolutely.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Fowler, what can the individual do? You've spoken about donors, who are mostly governments I presume, and in the introduction we spoke about UNMAS facilitating the dialogue with donor countries. What about a dialogue with individuals? I mean the wealthy and not so wealthy people who might be interested in this problem and since yours is a voluntary fund might be interested in contributing to it. Are you doing anything along those lines?

FOWLER: I would suggest that individuals that wish to contribute to this process the very best way they can do is if their government has not signed on to a ban on mines is to encourage their government to do so. I would not encourage – this sounds like a non-UN statement, it probably is – I would not encourage them to send their money to the United Nations. I would encourage them to fund their own non-governmental organizations. We work very closely with these organizations.

LITTLEJOHNS: Lots of lobbying groups are they?

FOWLER: Well, it's not just the lobbying groups. I mean there are a number: the Mines Advisory Group, Halo Trust, Handicap International, the Vietnam Veterans Association. These organizations are very effective in mine clearance operations throughout the world and they can get in and clear areas and do the work on the ground very quickly, very efficiently. We establish the priorities and the policies and the standards and we can advise people where to send their money. And the reason I say this is because the UN is not a tax deductible organization and I think for many people who wish to give, particularly those who wish to give big, they may wish to give it to somewhere where they can then claim it as a tax deduction.

LITTLEJOHNS: Jim there's less than a minute left if you have a question.

WURST: All right, quickly. You talked generally about some specific cases of countries that are still producing mines but not exporting, are there any major production and exporting countries left?

FOWLER: There are some, yes.

WURST: And they are?

FOWLER: I don't want to point fingers at the moment.

WILLIAMS: Come on, stigmatize. Stigmatize.

FOWLER: Well, I think the former Yugoslavia is one of the areas where we're finding a lot of mines from there right now in these present conflicts. But frankly till we go into Ethiopia or Eritrea I don't know where those mines have been

made. But we'll find out. We know. We can find out very quickly. So until we go into these new conflicts I really don't know where the new mines are being laid. We're in Southern Lebanon right now and of course Israeli mines have been found there but that's not any surprise to anybody.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Fowler, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Mary Fowler, Officer-in-Charge of the United Nations Mine Action Service. She was interviewed by James Wurst of *InterPress Service* and Ian Williams of *The Nation*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827L, New York, N.Y., 10017.

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